



Unit for History and Philosophy of Science &
Sydney Center for the Foundations of Science

18 October 2011

To whom it may concern:

Re: Professor Eric Scerri—Public Speaking/ Lecturing Skills & Standing

Professor Scerri has asked me to comment on my experience of his public lecturing in the areas of philosophy of science, philosophy and history of chemistry, and especially his widely known scholarly and popular work on the periodic table of elements.

Before I met Eric Scerri last year, I had had the pleasure of reading his work on the history of the periodic table, scholarly based and attractive writing on a topic which, it turns out in his hands, is rich in color and in philosophical instruction (which sneaks up on you). The story is brilliantly told as a drama simultaneously of human brilliance, competition, insight, error and chance. It is history of science perfectly pitched for the wider than professional expert audience, yet filled with conceptual and philosophical insights that seduce rather than bludgeon. I am particularly sensitive to the difficulty, hence the craft, involved in delivering intellectually serious, yet highly appetizing popular history of science writing. It is something I tried to do in my textbooks. In fact the profession of history of science is presently racked by debate about the status and role of the increasing flood of popular history of science and technology books—as though this flood were capable of being stopped, especially by academics! The real issue is whether a popularizing work has the knack of conveying serious scientific, historical and philosophical insights or whether it descends into rather pointless hagiographical ‘*just so*’, or ‘*wow, look at that*’ cheerleading of the kind we term ‘Whiggish’. (You may Google ‘Whig history of science’). This is the very point about Scerri’s work—in its popular aspects it is absolutely best practice product, in my humble opinion, and that is a valuable commodity these days.

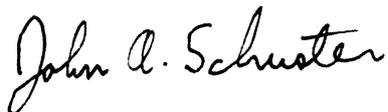
I then had the opportunity to see Professor Scerri in action at a conference on making chemistry, and its history, a suitable subject for examination in the philosophy of science (a discipline long focused only on physics, and more recently on biology). His work on the periodic table provided a perfect base for addressing this, but what struck me most about the occasion was the fact that Scerri’s talk was by far the most lucid, amusing-yet-educational, polished and persuasive of the two day’s harvest. The bulk of the audience was graduate students in various cognate fields, and other experts, like myself, who had not really worked in history or philosophy of chemistry before. So Scerri was both selling new work and educating a wider audience, and doing so in a charmingly erudite manner. The effect, at least on this usually skeptical veteran, was very impressive indeed; a response I later registered amongst both younger and older colleagues. It was the need to speak to a wider audience, both compellingly and informatively that struck me. I made a mental note that this fellow obviously would be a popular teacher in his own institution and first rate recruiter for introductory HPS courses—a model for what such units need in these days when selling and popularizing disciplines is so important inside the academy. The point for you is related: Scerri in person can deliver on just those features of expert yet accessible popularization that mark his publications. When he

indicated to me that he was considering a wider swathe of public lecturing, I saw immediately he had grasped precisely the natural consequence of his past experience and accrued skills.

Beyond that, I think that best way professionally to evaluate from your own perspective what he is proposing is simply to meet him and perhaps review some recordings of the sorts of things he did at the conference, which I attended. They will speak for themselves. I do not work in media, so I am not 'competent' to award points for charisma, but I suspect there is quite a bit on offer in this case.

If I can be of any further assistance to you, or if you require a signed, hard copy version of this letter direct to you, please let me know.

Sincerely yours,



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